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FORMER NAZI WAR CRIMINAL DEPORTED
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WASHINGTON

An accused Nazi war criminal who lived in the United States for 35 years and served as archbishop of the Romanian Orthodox Church in America has been deported, the Justice Department says.

Department officials said Tuesday Viorel Trifa, 70, a leader of the anti-Semitic Iron Guard government in Romania during World War II, flew from New York to Lisbon Monday night after Portugal granted him a visa.

If he had not found a country willing to accept him, he was due to be deported to his native Romania in October.

"This persecutor of countless innocent Jews before and during World War II cannot consider the United States a haven," Attorney General William French Smith said in a statement.

Author Elie Wiesel, head of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, applauded the deportation, which he said "signals once again that there is no room for such war criminals in our midst."

Trifa had been living in Detroit where he has been highly visible as the archbishop of the Romanian Orthodox Church in this country.

"He did not leave because he wanted to go to Portugal," said Neal Sher, director of the Justice Department's unit that prosecutes war crimes. "He left because the United States exposed him. He was able to get to a country where I guess he felt he would not be prosecuted."

Sher said Trifa called for persecution of Jews in Romania as head of a student group called "the shock troops" of the Iron Guards.

Trifa used his position as editor of the newspaper "Libertatea" to spread Nazi propaganda inciting anti-Semitism with "crude" caricatures and comments, Sher said.

Trifa was protected by the Nazi Gestapo in Romania and Germany, Sher said, and entered the United States in 1950, becoming a naturalized citizen seven years later.

Sher said "there was no involvement, no involvement whatsoever" by the CIA in Trifa's passage to America.

Nine years ago, the U.S. attorney's office in Detroit began proceedings to strip Trifa of his citizenship. In 1980 he legally conceded he was deportable.

To avoid years of appeals, the Justice Department agreed to a compromise with Trifa, giving him until October of this year before he would be deported to Romania -- if the country would take him.

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"He was fearful of going to Romania clearly, and I'm sure the prospect of going to Israel did not sit very well with him either," Sher said.

Sher and Stephen Trott, assistant attorney general for criminal investigations, said Trifa is the third accused Nazi war criminal under prosecution by the Justice Department's Office of Special Investigations to depart the United States recently.

They said it is possible Trifa may never come to trial.

The State Department will not grant him a visa nor will immigration authorities allow him back in the country, they said, and if he were to enter under an assumed name, he would be "subject to immediate arrest."